"Tracking the Logistician's Battle"
by CPT Daniel Krug, 204th Support Battalion, 2/4ID, FOB DUKE, IRAQ

The convoy is inside of four hours until they leave the base now. Loads are being finalized, secured, and checked. Vehicles rumble and rattle in the staging area dust as the sun sets. Convoy commanders are off to the operations center to get their brief and additional equipment necessary on the road ahead. Where will it be tonight? We know and they know but we try to keep the enemy from knowing. SSG Sherman Sheppard is hard at work moving about the vehicles and Soldiers spot-checking personnel, equipment, communications and weapons for any deficiencies the convoy commander might have missed.

SSG Sheppard is an NCO from the battalion's S-3 section and, though he won't be going on convoy tonight, his job is just as important. An S-3 section, or battalion plans and operations section, is the group of officers and enlisted personnel charged with planning and executing the current and future operations of a battalion. In the 204th Support Battalion, the S-3 shop (as it is commonly referred to) operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week putting trucks on the road to deliver supplies to forward operating bases spread throughout the area of operations as well as a myriad of other tasks.

The section has many responsibilities, from current operations to future plans to the training of Soldiers of the 204th Support Battalion. We are a traffic control center, a news agency, a weather station…the list continues. Among the top responsibilities of the S-3 is running the battalion's Tactical Operations Center (TOC): the hub of all the battalion's effort and the battalion commander's key source of information for making decisions on the battlefield. Designated to synchronize the battalion endeavors into a singular and steady direction, the S-3 bears a heavy burden. They are the life-line to the Soldiers on the road.

Day and night, the battalion pushes logistical convoys across the country in support of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division (Mechanized). Stocked with the necessary supplies to keep the armor and infantry combat teams running, it is vital that these convoys arrive at their destinations, make their drops and return to duplicate the task the next day. To ensure they have the best "road-side assistance" in the world, the TOC employs the latest communications and digital equipment.

On the cusp of this vast wave of information flowing from the roads to the operations center is the Radio/Telephone Operators (RTO). PFC Verzani and PFC Riojas, spend their days receiving messages from across the operating base and across the battle-space. Between the radios, telephones and digital systems the information flow can seem like a disruptive cacophony to the untrained ear. However, one person in the TOC is trained to decipher the information and sort it for relevance: the S-3 Battle Captain. Today, CPT Sedric Burrell is on day shift. He takes the seemingly endless flow of digital and voice data from the RTOs and filters, prioritizes and presents it to the commander for guidance.

Current operations aren't the only thing going on in the TOC though; not by any means. Although deployed with a full time combat mission, the 204th has not stopped training to maintain its proficiency and to instruct incoming personnel. Preparing for training is a full-time collaborative effort between the Future Ops station, the Battle Captain and the Land and Ammunition NCO.

Upon occupying FOB Duke, the 204th SB adopted two live-fire ranges for training while deployed in Iraq which were quickly certified and put to use by the S-3 section under the direction of MSG Richardson, S-3 NCOIC, and managed by SFC Smith. As of today, three tenant units and a variety of civilian organizations use the range to conduct weapons training to include training of the newly formed Iraqi Army units. Future plans for the ranges include building pop-up targets for more realistic gunnery scenarios.

In addition to the two live fire ranges, SFC Smith also manages an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) Range built on FOB Duke by an Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) personnel living on the FOB. The range is designed to train new soldiers on the basic tactics the enemy uses while employing IEDs and to teach new tactics to soldiers who have been in theater for a while. In addition to these ranges the S-3 section also plans and supervises the execution of training events such as IED, convoy and combat lifesaver training to maintain readiness for the duration of the deployment.

Almost everything the 204th Support Battalion does is on paper…somewhere. From the time the first troops hit ground in Kuwait, the Battalion S-3 section has published close to 150 operations orders. On average there are three fragmentary or warning orders published per day with the occasional operations order for the major battalion events. Each day the companies receive guidance from the commander, through the S-3, for conducting patrols, training or changes to daily operations. Doing so helps subordinate commanders keep tabs on their requirements and also creates a record of accomplishments the battalion has achieved.

This entire effort is a huge task that requires much coordination and a meticulous eye for detail. In the 204th this undertaking is assigned to MAJ Emilly Stoffel, S-3 OIC, and MSG Richardson, S-3 NCOIC. Aside from prioritizing the workload, balancing the strengths and weaknesses of their staff and tracking daily operations these two individuals also have to coordinate with the Support Operations branch and the S-2 (Military Intelligence) branch which also operate in the TOC.

Working in an S-3 section is a job that requires long hours and endless patience. Though stressful, it is immensely rewarding to receive a convoy safely back into the FOB, mission complete, that only a few days ago was a concept on paper. It is that kind of evolution of thought into action that makes it most exciting.